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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted which partially tested the validity of assumptions of the Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) based model of communication competence. Two research questions were explored: (1) how well can a CMM-based model predict an individual's perceived communication competence in a given context? and (2) how is an individual perceived when he or she exhibits varied degrees of communication competence in a given context? One hundred eighty-four undergraduate volunteers from a large midwestern university and two large Southern California universities participated as subjects in the study. Booklets consisting of one of three dialogues, the 20 Likert scales, and three open-ended questions were randomly distributed to the subjects. Each subject was instructed to read the conversation between the two individuals and then answer the questions concerning their behavior. The study generated four findings which may have important implications for future investigations in this area: (1) communication competence should be viewed as a relational construct; (2) communication competence should be looked upon as a systematic construct; (3) there may be various levels of communication competence; and (4) since communication should be examined in relation to the communication patterns developed by at least two individuals, each interaction is unique and each dyad may set their own standards of competent communicators. The results strongly suggest that communication competence entails more than just knowledge, skills, or normative behavior. (Three tables of data are included, and 14 references are attached.) (MG)

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A Preliminary Investigation of Communication Competence: As a Systemic Construct

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A Preliminary Investigation of Communication Competence:

As a Systemic Construct

Communication competence has attracted much attention in recent years as one of the basic constructs in our discipline. However, a consensual view as to what constitutes the concept of competence has not and still does not exist. Definitions of "competence" are as diverse as the theorists who compose them. In fact, it appears that the controversy and confusion over conceptualizing and operationalizing the construct has become more pronounced as researchers are trying to pinpoint what communication competence entails.

In the past several years many attempts have been made in search of a theoretical model which can adequately explain competence in interpersonal communication (Allen & Brown, 1976; Berger & Calabrese, 1975; Bochner & Kelly, 1974; Brunner, 1984; Brunner & Spitzberg, Duran & Wheeless, 1980; Harris, 1979; Phelps & Snavely; 1979; Spitzberg, 1981, 1982; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984; Spitzberg & Hechet, 1984; Wiemann, 1977). These models incorporate different sets of variables or dimensions in conceptualizing communication competence.

The earlier investigation of communication competence was based on a "normative" approach in which competent communicators were viewed as possessing specific norms of behavior or socially valued skills which incompetent communicators did not. For example, Wiemann (1977), in his classic study of communication competence, defines a competent communicator as one who is empathetic, supportive, and relaxed while interacting with others. That is, the competent communicator is one who is able to accomplish goals while maintaining the face of fellow interactants. Berger & Calabrese (1975) have offered Uncertainty Reduction Theory as a tool for explaining communication competence. According to Berger and Calabrese, the successful communicator is able to demonstrate various skills in enacting a socially normative communication episode. The normative approach presupposes that competent communicators are following socially accepted rules, and therefore any deviation from the predicted conversational patterns raises questions of the individual's competence since he or she is viewed as violating social norms.

However, attempts to identify such norms or skills in concrete terms or compile an exhaustive list of norms or skills have proven to be fruitless. Based on the premise that at least two people are needed for interpersonal communication, a relational perspective has been proposed and developed in recent years. Spitzberg and Cupach (1984), for example, have conceptualized communication competence according to the following five theoretical propositions: (1) competence is contextual; (2) competence is perceived appropriateness and effectiveness; (3) competence is an interpersonal impression; (4) competence is functional; (5) competence is a graduated phenomena (i.e., competence is defined along a continuum, and not a dichotomy). Specifically, the relational approach views communication competence as not a skill per se but a series of inferences social actors continuously make about one another while being engaged in a specific communication episode in a given context. As Spitzberg and Cupach (1984) put it, "to be perceived as a competent communicator one is likely to be motivated to communicate, knowledgeable about how to communicate, skilled in communicating, and sensitive to the expectations of the context in which the communication occurs." (p. 152)

The relational approach shares the same assumptions as the normative approach in that communication competence is a performance-oriented, multifaceted construct consisting of various skills and knowledge about how to communicate appropriately and effectively. Moreover, it stresses the knowledge of social communicative patterns and the social actor's ability to "fit in" by adapting to the situation to achieve certain goals.

The relational approach, however, differentiates itself from a simple normative perspective in that it emphasizes the role of the "subjective" context as a key factor that affects competence inferences by each actor in a given situation. Brunner and Spitzberg (1986) argue that research on communication competence as a relational construct requires "a subjective level of analysis that comports with the level of analysis interactants use." (p. 5) They further posit that interactants constructively and processually define social contexts of which they are a part, thus suggesting the importance of creative aspects of communication.

Theoretical Orientation

This study is based on a relational view of communication competence, and looks to the theoretical perspective known as the Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM; Pearce & Cronen, 1980; Cronen, Pearce, & Harris, 1982) for a theoretical framework. CMM conceptualizes individuals as integral parts of the communication systems or contexts they create, and defines communication competence as a systemic construct that is closely linked with the requirements of a given communication context. According to CMM, communicatively competent individuals are seen as those who are able to move within and among the various communication contexts they subjectively create with their partners. In other words, communication competence represents the degree of fit between the actor's skills and the requirement of a given communication context/ system, or more specifically a "relationship" as perceived by others.

The Coordinated Management of Meaning's approach makes a number of assumptions which seem to be useful as well as important in an empirical investigation of communication competence. First, CMM states that competence cannot be determined based on the possession or lack of particular skills. Rather, communication competence must be measured by comparing the individual's abilities with those required by a given episode which constitutes a context for communication. Second, communication competence not only depends on the actor's knowledge and performance of established societal rules or norms, but also upon their ability to mutually create new dyadic rules for the conversation/episode they are engaged in. In other words, communication competence encompasses more than an individual's ability to "fit in" with preestablished patterns of interaction. In fact, the goal of fitting in may be impossible to reach or may not necessarily be the best option available in various situations.

The Coordinated Management of Meaning identifies three levels of communication competence. The three levels represent (1) a person who cannot even adequately interact with others in a given context (minimal); (2) a person who can interact adequately with others in a given context (satisfactory); and (3) a person who can knowingly violate norms or even create new rules for interaction to his or her own benefit or to the benefit of both parties involved.

More specifically, an individual is considered "minimally competent" if his or her skills or abilities are less than those required by a particular context. For example, a sojourner may become minimally competent if he or she does not speak the language in the host country. He or she cannot even predict which communicative acts are appropriate for the context or conversation he or she is currently in.

Satisfactorily competent individuals have the knowledge of the conversational rules necessary to interact at least adequately with others in a given context. The same sojourner in the preceding example can be perceived as a satisfactorily competent communicator if he or she has good command of the language and knows the customs well enough to fit in with the host culture. He or she is able to interpret the implications of particular messages in context, adapt to particular communication patterns, and take the other's perspective. The satisfactorily competent individual is capable of predicting particular patterns of communication, thus being able to perform appropriate behavior which the context calls for. He or she, however, is still "enmeshed" in the on-going communication pattern and is unable to change it or become too creative in the conversation.

The third level, optimal competence, represents those individuals who have control over their degree of enmeshment within any particular communication pattern. A manager for a multinational corporation where he or she leads a team of engineers with various different cultural backgrounds may need to be optimally competent to deal with a conflict among the employees, achieve high productivity and high employee morale, etc. The optimally competent must have not only the skills necessary to communicate effectively in a given context but also the ability to critique or analyze an on-going communication pattern. That is, an optimally competent individual can choose to communicate in a diverse, creative or unique way. In an effort to communicate quite differently from the socially normative pattern identified, optimal communicators becomes less enmeshed and more creative in communicating with others.

Based on this conceptualization of communication competence, the present study explores the following research questions.

R.Q. 1: How well can a CMM-based model predict an individual's perceived communication competence in a given context?

R.Q. 2: How is an individual perceived when he or she exhibits varied degrees of communication competence in a given context?

Methods

A simple factorial design was used in this study. The level of communication competence in an initial conversation (minimal, satisfactory, and optimal) was treated as the independent variable. Dependent variables included: 1) a global impression of perceived competence, 2) appropriateness, 3) creativity, 4) enmeshment, 5) episode valence, and 6) social attraction. In addition the following three open ended questions were included, 1) What helped you decide if the person was competent or incompetent? 2) If you were in a similar situation would you have participated in the conversation the same way as Lee (target person)? and 3) What are other things you would have said or done?

Respondents

A total of 184 volunteer subjects participated in this study. Of these respondents, 84 were undergraduate volunteers enrolled in a basic speech communication course at a large midwestern university. The remaining 100 were undergraduate volunteers from two large southern California universities.

Independent Variable

Three initial conversation dialogues between two college students, Chris and Lee, were created by varying the general level of communication competence of both students (conversation 1 = Chris and Lee are minimally competent, conversation 2 = Chris and Lee are satisfactorily competent, and conversation 3 = Chris and Lee are optimally competent). The names Chris and Lee, were deliberately chosen because they are sexually ambiguous. Dialogues of initial interactions were selected because initial interactions are a common episode and they follow certain conversational patterns. Specifically, Berger et al (1973) claim that in a typical initial interaction; 1) the first few minutes are dominated by exchanges of demographic information, 2) after about five minutes topics pertaining to attitudes, opinions, and other persons tend to replace demographic

information and 3) topics such as hobbies, personality future plans, and past activities are either rare conversation topics .... or they are relatively evenly distributed throughout the first ten minutes of the interaction.

The three levels of competence were operationalized according to the Target person's (Lee's) ability to align conversational actions and the sequence of the topics. In the minimally competent dialogue, Chris and Lee fail to provide verbal statements that indicate the adjustment of one message to the other (no alignment). For the satisfactory conversation, Chris and Lee follow the established initial interaction pattern as identified by Berger and they indicate through their statements the alignment of their messages to one another in conformance with the previously identified for initial interactions. Finally, for the optimally competent conversations, the verbal statements attempted to create an episode that deviated from the pattern set by society. That is, for the optimally competent conversation, "the aligning statements initiated a metacommunication episode concurrent with the culturally normative pattern" (Pearce and Cronen, 1980, p. 217). In regards to the topics discussed, the minimally competent individual attempted to follow the topics Berger found to be most often discussed in an initial conversation; the satisfactorily competent individual successfully incorporated Berger's topics into the conversation; the optimally competent individual initiated new topics in to the conversation.

Dependent Measures

Perceived competence, appropriateness, predictability, creativity, enmeshment, episode valence, and social attraction of the target person were all measured using seven point Likert-type scales. Reliability coefficients ranged from .52 to .86 (Cronbach's Alpha), and were deemed satisfactory on most measures.

Table 1 about here

Procedures

Booklets consisting of one of the three dialogues, the twenty Likert scales, and the three open

ended questions, were randomly distributed to the subjects. Each subject was instructed to read the conversation between the two individuals who had met for the first time and then answer the questions concerning their behavior. At the conclusion of the session, respondents were debriefed and thanked for their participation.

Results

Manipulation Check

The validity of the experimental manipulation was checked with regard to the perceived levels of overall communication competence of the target person in each of the three conversations. A one-way analysis of variance revealed a significant main effect for overall competence ($F = 66.28$, $df = 2/181$, $p = .000$) A posthoc test of means using the Student Newman-Keuls procedure showed that the three conversations differed in perceived communication competence in the predicted direction. Minimal, satisfactory, and optimal competence levels were perceived by respondents as being significantly different from one another (X's = 3.10, 5.10, 5.59, respectively).

Predictors of Perceived Communication Competence

In order to examine the adequacy of a CMM model in predicting an individual's perceived communication competence, a predictive function was sought using the step-wise multiple regression procedure. The results of the analysis are presented in Table 2. The model obtained included all four variables which were entered in the analysis, and accounted for 68% of the variance in overall perceived competence of the target person in a given context (Multiple $R = .82$, R Square = .68, $F = 94.47$, $p = .000$). The results also indicated that the best predictor of overall communication competence was enmeshment (Multiple $R = .80$, R Square = .64, $F = 3.19.637$, $p = .000$). The results seemed to suggest that the four-variable model would adequately predict an individual's overall communication competence in a given context.

Table 2 about here

Perceptions of the Target Person

In order to further examine implications of varied degrees of communication competence in specific contexts, separate analyses were conducted on each of the four constituents of overall communication competence as well as episode valence and perceived social attraction of the target person. Means and standard deviations are presented in Table 3.

Table 3 about here

In regard to the four constituents of the model, significant differences were found as a function of communication competence. For predictability a curvilinear relationship was found. While ANOVA found a significant effect of episode ($F = 5.05$, $df = 2/181$, $p = .007$, $eta^2 = .05$), the results of the Student Newman-Keuls test indicated that respondents perceived the target's act in the satisfactory competence conversation ($X = 3.86$) as being significantly more predictable than either the minimal ($X = 4.67$) or optimal competence ($X = 4.55$) conversation.

For creativity a one-way analysis of variance revealed a significant effect of communication competence ($F = 30.10$, $df = 2/181$, $p = .000$, $eta^2 = .25$). A posthoc multiple comparison of means using the Student Newman-Keuls procedure indicated that the target person was perceived as potentially being able to be more creative in the context of optimal competence conversation ($X = 2.83$) than either in the context of minimal ($X = 4.86$) or satisfactory ($X = 3.72$) competence conversation.

Similarly, a significant main effect of communication competence was found for enmeshment ($F = 72.87$), $df = 2/181$, $p = .000$, $eta^2 = .45$). The results of the Student Newman-Keuls test indicated that the target person was perceived to be variably enmeshed within the conversation. In other words, the target person was perceived to be hardly enmeshed within the minimal competence conversation ($X = 5.15$), while he/she was regarded as being highly enmeshed within the satisfactory ($X = 2.904$) or optimal ($X = 2.60$) competence conversation. There was also a significant main effect of communication competence on appropriateness ($F = 54.79$, $df = 2/181$,

$p = .000$, $eta^2 = .38$) that the target person's act was perceived to be highly appropriate in the optimal ($X = 2.55$) and satisfactory ($X = 2.94$) conversations. In contrast, the target person was perceived to be acting inappropriately in the minimal competence conversation ($X = 4.78$).

With regard to the target person's social attractiveness, one-way ANOVA found a significant effect of communication competence ($F = 37.38$, $df = 2/181$, $p = .000$, eta2 = .41). The results of the Student Newman-Keuls test indicated that the target person was perceived to be highly attractive in the context of the optimal competence conversation ($X = 2.22$), and he/she was also rated positively in the context of the satisfactory competence conversation ($X = 3.52$). However, respondents felt that the target person was significantly less attractive as a communicator in the minimal competence conversation ($X = 4.84$).

By the same token, respondents reported that the degree to which the target person enjoyed the conversation also varied as a function of perceived communication competence in the context. There was a significant main effect of competence on episode valence ($F = 80.78$, $df = 2/181$, $p = .000$, $eta^2 = .47$). A posthoc test using the Student Newman-Keuls procedure revealed that the three conversations differed significantly from one another in terms of episode valence. Specifically, respondents felt that the target person enjoyed the optimal competence conversation the most ($X = 5.60$). They also rated positively the valence of the satisfactory competence conversation ($X = 5.13$). In contrast, episode valence for the minimal competence conversation was significantly negative ($X = 3.67$).

Discussion

This study was conducted as an empirical test of "communication competence" as a context-dependent, systemic construct. Based on the Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM), this study attempted to partially test the validity of assumptions of the CMM-based model of communication competence. Two research questions were explored in this study: (1) How well can a CMM-based model predict an individual's perceived communication competence?; and (2) How is an individual perceived when he or she exhibits varied degrees of communication

competence?

With regard to Research Question 1, the results of the multiple regression analysis indicated that the four variables CMM focuses on were useful in predicting how the target person's communication competence is perceived. It was found that enmeshment, predictability, creativity, and appropriateness jointly accounted for 68% of total variance in the overall perceived competence. The results suggest that this four-variable model can adequately predict the target person's communication competence. They also indicate that respondents employed these constructs in evaluating how competent the target person was in a given context. In other words, they made context-dependent inferences about the target person based on the four constructs. It then appears that these four variables constitute a fairly good representation of the concept of communication competence.

With regard to Research Question 2, several interesting findings were obtained when the four constituents of the predictive function of communication competence were further analyzed. In the context of the conversation representing minimal communication context, the target person's communicative pattern was perceived as fairly unpredictable, uncreative, inappropriate, and he or she was not very highly enmeshed within the on-going episode. This finding is generally consistent with the way "minimal competence" is conceptualized in CMM. In other words, when the target person was engaged in a conversation in a minimally competent manner, he or she was not seen to quite "fit in" and was perceived as fairly negatively by the observer.

As for the target person carrying on a conversation reflecting a satisfactory level of communication competence, he or she was rated positively and was often perceived as competent as the optimally competent person. In the context of both satisfactory and optimal competence conversations, the target person was perceived to be communicating appropriately and was highly enmeshed within the on-going conversation. However, some noteworthy differences also emerged. The target person was perceived significantly less predictable but more creative within the conversation representing optimal communication competence.

These results seem to indicate the following. First, "enmeshment" and "appropriateness" may

be the main criteria in differentiating minimal competent persons from more competent individuals, while "predictability" (or "lack thereof") and "creativity" may be the key to understanding optimal communication competence. At any rate, this particular finding strongly suggests that the creative aspect of communication is extremely important in determining how competent a social actor is in a given context, thus confirming assumptions of CMM's approach to communication competence.

In terms of the assessment of episode valence and social attractiveness of the target person, similar results were yielded. Specifically, while both were rated positively, the optimal competence conversation was perceived to be significantly more enjoyable than the satisfactory competence conversation. In contrast, the conversation reflecting a minimal level of communication competence was perceived to be negatively valenced and uninteresting. Similarly, the target person was perceived to be highly attractive within the context of the satisfactory or optimal competence conversation. The consistency in respondents' evaluation of the conversation (i.e., "context") and the communication competence of the target person (i.e., "actor") suggests a high degree of conceptual interdependence between "context" and "communication competence." It follows that it is impossible to talk about one without the other, and therefore the results lend strong support for a systemic view of communication competence which CMM argues for.

Although its scope is limited, this study generated several findings which may have important implications on future investigations into the concept of communication competence. First, communication competence should be viewed as a relational construct. Communication competence is not an aggregate of skills but is best conceptualized as a function of two or more individuals adapting to one another exercising their own creativity while controlling the degree of enmeshment, appropriateness, predictability, etc. Second, communication competence should be looked upon as a systemic construct. There is strong interdependence between the context and the actors' perceived communication competence, which define or characterize each other. It seems impossible to separate these two constructs in discussing communication competence. Third, individuals may not be either competent or incompetent; rather, there are various levels of communication competence (for example, minimal, satisfactory, optimal, or maybe more),

independently of the possession or lack of certain skills. Fourth, since communication competence should be examined in relation to the communication patterns developed by at least two individuals, each interaction is unique and each dyad (or small group) may set their own standards of competent communicators.

Equally important is a pedagogical implication of this study. The results of the present study strongly suggests that communication competence entails more than just knowledge, skills, or normative behavior. Respondents rated the optimally competent target person very positively, even though his or her communication pattern was perceived less predictable, suggesting that it is possible to be creative in communication without being alienated or giving negative impressions to others. In other words, it may not be best just to emphasize skills or follow normative patterns simply in order to "fit in" with the rest of the society. Hence, it may be more beneficial to teach people how they can be optimally competent in a given context while, for example, deliberately changing destructive patterns of talk or just enjoy the conversation more. These also seem to be interesting questions to be explored in future studies of communication competence.

Table 1

Reliability Coefficients for Measurement Scales

Scale	Cronbach's Alpha
1. General Competence	.52
Lee (target person) was highly competent in this conversation.	
2. Predictability	.84
Lee (target person) could predict with a high degree of certainty, how this conversation would go.	
3. Appropriateness	.65
Lee's (target person) actions were highly appropriate in this situation.	
4. Creativity	.74
Lee (target person) demonstrated s/he was highly able to experiment with new topics in this conversation without causing confusion for Chris.	
5. Episode Valence	.81
Lee (target person) enjoys participating in this conversation very much.	
6. Enmeshment	.55
What Lee had to say did not at all influence how this conversation went.	
7. Social Attraction	.85
I think it would be difficult to meet and talk to Lee (target person).	

Note: Scales ranged from 1(=strongly agree) to 7 (strongly disagree. Scales 1, 2, 3, 4, and 6 consist of 2 items; scale 5 consists of 3 items, and scale 6 consists of four items. Only one item is presented here because of space limitation.

Enmeshment and social attraction items were recoded.

Table 2

Summary of Multiple Regression Analysis

Step	Variable	F	Significance	Multiple R	R(2)	Beta
1	Enmeshment	319.64	.000	.798	.637	-.798
2	Appropriate	185.68	.000	.819	.672	-.240
3	Creativity	125.63	.000	.822	.676	-.081
4	Predictable	94.47	.000	.823	.678	-.042

Table 3

Mean Ratings of Perceived Competence, Appropriateness, Creativity Predictability, Enmeshment, Episode Valence and Social Attraction As a Function of Episode Type

Scale	Mean	SD	n
Predictability			
Minimal	4.67 a	1.58	58
Satisfactory	3.89 b	1.40	61
Optimal	4.55 a	1.39	65
Appropriateness			
Minimal	4.78 a	1.48	58
Satisfactory	2.94 b	1.08	61
Optimal	2.55 b	1.15	65
Creativity			
Minimal	4.86 a	1.47	58
Satisfactory	3.72 b	1.44	61
Optimal	2.83 c	1.43	65
General Competence			
Minimal	3.09 a	1.35	58
Satisfactory	5.10 b	1.21	61
Optimal	5.59 c	1.22	65
Enmeshment[1]			
Minimal	5.15 a	1.40	58
Satisfactory	2.94 b	1.14	61
Optimal	2.60 b	1.21	65
Episode Valence			
Minimal	3.67 a	1.51	58
Satisfactory	5.13 b	1.29	61
Optimal	5.60 c	1.02	65
Social Attraction[2]			
Minimal	4.84 a	1.24	58
Satisfactory	3.52 b	1.20	61
Optimal	2.22 c	1.00	65

Note. Means with different subscripts differ significantly at $p < .05$.

[1]Scales were recodec .

[2]Scales were recoded

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